

A

S E R M O N

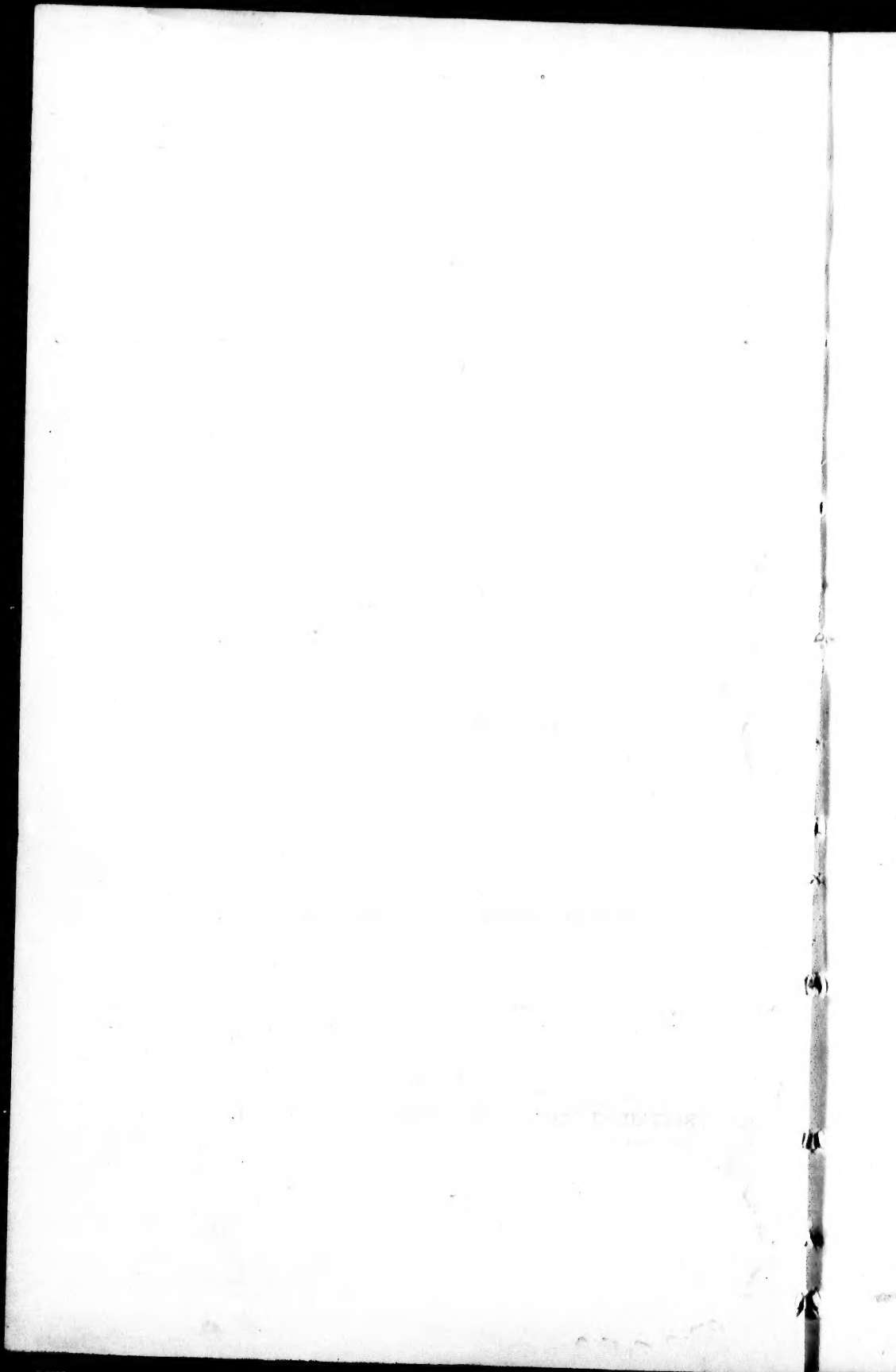
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D A N C I N G :

PREACHED BY A MINISTER IN CANADA WEST, TO HIS CONGREGATION
ON THE SABBATH EVENING IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING
A VILLAGE BALL.

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTICE, BY THE AUTHOR.

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P R E F A C E.

A remark or two explanatory of the circumstances in which this Sermon was preached, and is now published, may be admitted by the reader.

I was in my study on a Saturday evening last winter, preparing a discourse for the following day, when a neighbour,—and he I may mention, as a proof that all intercourse between ministers of the Episcopal Church, and those of other Churches has not ceased,—a minister of that Church, called on me. He had come to express to me his concern about a Ball, that was to take place in our neighbourhood on the ensuing Monday, and to consult with me about the best way of discountenancing it.

As it happened, this was the first information that I had received of the Ball, and I immediately felt that I had as good reason to be concerned for its occurrence, as my Episcopal brother. And, with a view to bear an explicit public testimony against it, I resolved to preach on the subject of Dancing on the following day.

The discourse I had in hand was thrown aside, another text was chosen, some thought was given to it during the remainder of the evening, and a discourse in substance the same as what is here published, was preached on the forenoon of Sabbath.

I was happily enabled to preach it with some measure of earnestness, and from this reason, in connexion with the novelty of the subject, and I believe also its telt appropriateness, my people listened to it with marked attention.

One of them, on my way home, expressed to me a strong wish to see it, as he said, "in print." Deferring something in this matter to the judgment of an intelligent and serious, though plain, member of my congregation, I wrote it out and sent it to my old friend and fellow-student, the Rev. John Martin, Editor of the *Halifax Guardian*, who readily gave it a place in his excellent paper. It appeared indeed under the disadvantage of being divided between two successive papers; and the circulation which it got, wide

though it was, did not bring it within the reach of those to whom it was at first addressed. Some recent circumstances have led me to think that a reprint of it, imperfect as it is, may, through the Divine blessing, be useful; and so I now give it to the public in the form of a Tract, respectfully commending it to the consideration of Christians and Christian Parents in general, and of the members of our Presbyterian Churches in particular.

And here I will make free to state that I have long been convinced that the sentiments and conduct of many of our people, regarding the class of amusements on which the Sermon animadverts, come far short of the scriptural standard. Too few seem to think that their following after them, or occasional attendance on them, is utterly inconsistent with the proprieties and the seriousness of the Christian life. And, to whatever extent they may be reprov'd in public or in private by the ministry, it is believed, that in few cases, the discipline of the Church is directed against them. Yet, who that rightly estimates the injury done to the Church by such amusements, will not allow that the Church-members who indulge in them, should be affectionately and faithfully dealt with by their Church rulers, in order to their being brought to renounce them.

In the Second Book of Discipline of the Church of Scotland, which was adopted by the General Assembly in the year 1581, Dancing is enumerated amongst other offences, that in the case of ministers are severally punishable by deposition. In a subsequent Act of Assembly,* it comes under the head of *Unlawful Gaming*. And, if dancing be indeed irreconcilable with the gravity and purity of the ministerial character, who will say that our Elders and Church members may yet innocently indulge in it? But it has been expressly forbidden to members of the Church, by repeated Acts of the General Assembly: and so late as the year 1701—a period of much reforming zeal in the Church of Scotland—we find the Assembly reviving former Acts against “promiscuous dancing,” and enjoining the Act which they then passed on the subject, to be read in all the Churches, and such measures to be adopted by Synods and Presbyteries as might restrain the practice. Like many other good enactments, these, in our own youthful days, and for a long period previously, had become to a great extent a dead letter.

* Passed in the year 1596.

But the value of their testimony to the unchristian character of Balls, as they are called, is not the less valuable: seeing that for the greater part of a century, anterior to the first quarter of the present century, the Church of Scotland was in a declining state.

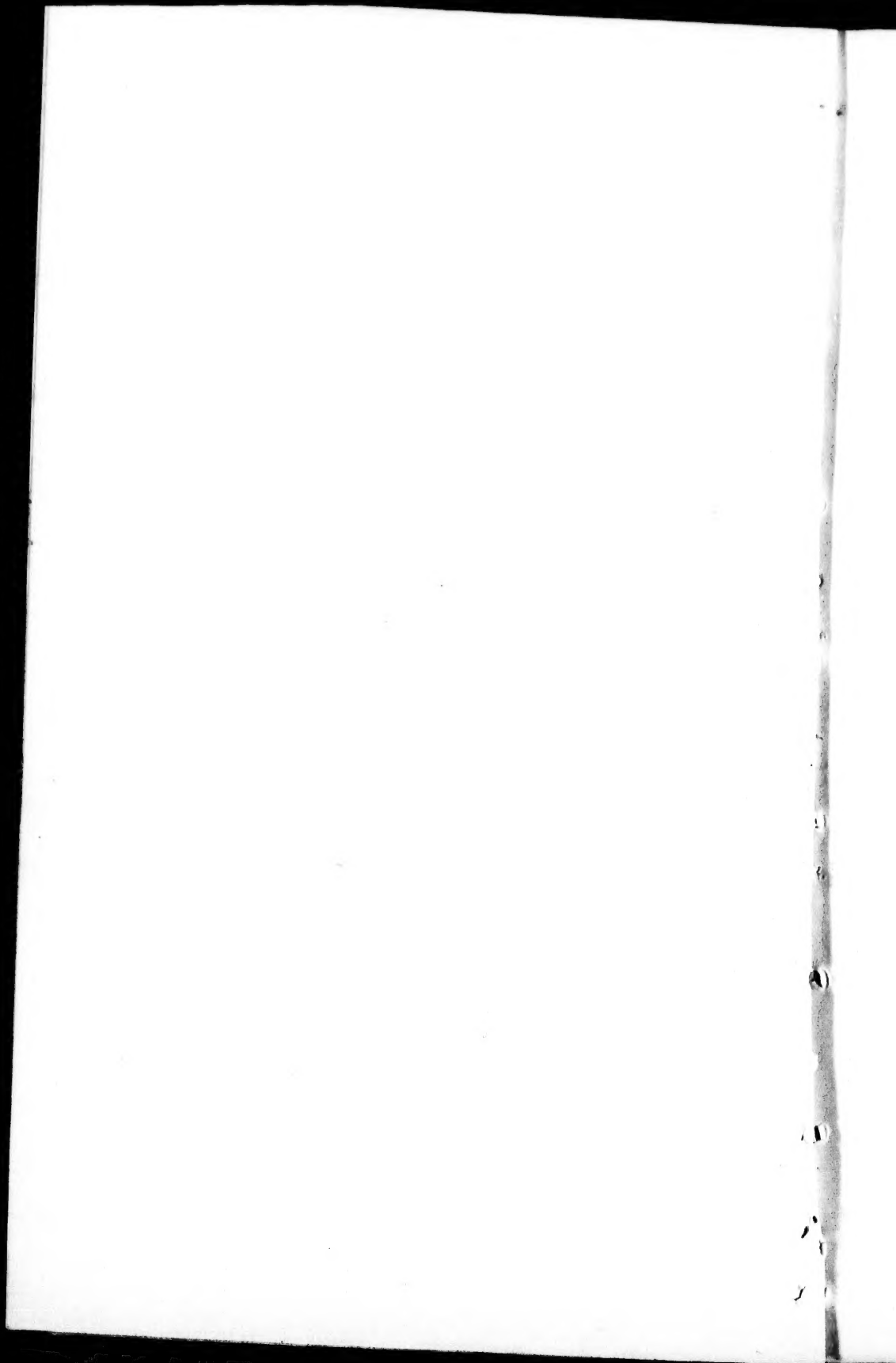
Blessed be God, that we have at least heard with our ears, that a revival of that venerable Church, to much of her primitive purity and zeal has been brought about; and that, in her progress to it, she has not allowed herself to be arrested with the clogs which the State would have fastened to her—for we do recognise the Church of Scotland, of historic fame, in THE FREE PROTESTING CHURCH OF SCOTLAND. It is presumed, that in these days, few if any ministers in Scotland could be found who would enter a Ball-room: certainly, if there are any such, they cannot be found in the ranks of the Free Church. The purifying process through which her ministry has passed, forbids the supposition that they should indulge in "*dansing and sic dissolutions*."* And we confidently anticipate that, ere long, any who indulge in these things, and yet claim a connexion with the Church of Christ, either by office or by membership, shall only be found in that sediment, from which all the good shall have been filtrated.

Those who notice the proceedings of the judicatories of the Presbyterian Church of the United States, as these are recorded in their religious papers, must have observed that several of these ecclesiastical bodies have recently been condemning dancing, as it is commonly practised, as unchristian. The Presbyterian Church of Canada must also put it away from amongst her members, if she would follow the things that "are honest, pure, lovely, and of good report."

WILLIAM RINTOUL.

STREETSVILLE,
November 30, 1843.

* So it is phrased in the copy of the Second Book of Discipline, contained in Mr. James Melvill's Diary recently published: that book is there entitled, "THE HEADS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE POLECIE OF THE KIRK."



SERMON.

—— “A time to dance.”—*Eccles.* iii. 4.

Satan could quote Scripture when it suited him, and ungodly men, without any desire of doing homage to the Divine Oracles, will do the same, when they can bring a detached text to countenance their errors or evil practices. Hence the careless worldling has been found to justify his unconcern about his spiritual and eternal interests by the words of Solomon, “Be not righteous over-much.” The avaricious man has found a pretext for hoarding up his wealth, and shutting his hand against the claims of benevolence, in the declaration of Paul, “If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel.” And the votaries of pleasure, who would be the last to allow the Word of God to interfere with their pursuits and enjoyments, are yet sometimes found vindicating their midnight revels by these words of our text, “There is a time to dance.” Now it might be said to such persons, “It is true that there is; as the inspired Oracles declare, a time to dance; but does it follow that the dancing which you plead for and practise—your balls and routs—constitute the dancing which Solomon speaks of? Do his words even imply that dancing is a duty?” He tells us also that there is “a time to pluck up that which is planted”—“a time to kill”—“a time to break down.” But who would find in these statements a warrant for destroying his neighbour's orchard, or house, and taking his life? But waiving for the time any thing like a critical examination of the text, let us attend for a little to the nature of the amusement of dancing, as it is called, according as we see it practised around us.

Dancing then, as we all know, is the skipping and leaping in measured time, and that to the strains of music. It is no solitary

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exercise, however, like that of the Dervishes or Mohammedan Priests, the mingling of the sexes is an essential part of the amusement. And to all the excitement arising from this circumstance there is ordinarily added, that which arises from the use of stimulating and intoxicating liquors. And this amusement, as it is called, is not that of an hour or two, but, according as it is generally practised, it is prolonged through the long night, even until the dawn of another day shall light home those who have done, for their immediate gratifications, what they have never, it may be, done for their souls, spent hour after hour in wakefulness. Yes there is *a time to dance*. Oh, that the children of light would now and then appropriate such *a time to pray*.

But let us look more narrowly at some of the moral characteristics and effects of such dancing. *First*—One undeniable effect of dancing, as practised in balls and routs, is the consuming of many precious hours in exercises that are adverse to all serious thought, and to communion with God in his worship.

The ball-room is confessedly no place to think of death, judgment or eternity. According to the Apostle Paul's command, our speech should be "*always*—with grace seasoned with salt." But any conversation that could at all be regarded as coming up to this characteristic, would be deemed sadly out of place in the interlude of a dance. So, he would have men to pray *every where*. And in point of fact his people do pray wherever they can realize the presence of God, and draw near unto him—as on their beds, and at their meals, in their walks, and their conferences with each other, as well as in their closets and public assemblies. But who ever thought of addressing themselves to God, even in the way of ejaculatory prayer, while wheeling in the curvets of a dance, or threading its mazes, or while sauntering in the ball-room. Now this is surely no good note of dancing.

But *secondly*, dancing, as it is generally conducted, is unfavourable to the health, and wasteful to the substance of those who addict themselves to it.

Scarcely a winter passes without some of the frequenters of balls being overtaken with severe diseases, and, it may be, being cut down by death, so that the ball-room, with all its frivolities, yea,

and sins, is not very unfrequently the prelude to the sick chamber and the grave. Nor is this to be wondered at, when we take into account that these amusements are most frequently gotten up during the severest season of the year—that the attire deemed most suitable for the dance is the worst possible for resisting the cold, and that the young are, for all the long hours of the ball, as well as in going to it or returning from it, ordinarily exempted from the care of any more prudent than themselves.*

We do not see in point of fact, that more than one or two public balls are held in the same place in the course of a season; yet it is to be feared that the money directly expended on these, to say nothing of the outlay for finery of dress, far exceeds the expenditure for any one year of those who frequent them, in the cause of Christian benevolence. The offering at the shrine of pleasure will be made, when the means cannot be found for helping forward the kingdom of Christ, relieving the indigent, or even for paying just debts.

Thirdly—Balls and dances lead into companionship with vain and profligate persons. Allowing that pious persons have ventured to take a part in such pleasures, every one must see that they are any thing but congenial to true piety, and that those who patronise and frequent them, are, in general, persons who, so far from professing godliness, would think themselves misrepresented if not maligned, if they were classed among the godly. They are rather the “lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God”—“the simple ones who love simplicity—the scornors who delight in scorning—the fools who hate knowledge;” and the young who are sent by their parents into the ball-room, or who, in disobedience to parental authority, as is sometimes the case, will go there, must expect to be exposed to all that is malignant in the communications of such persons.

* Some year or two ago, a paragraph went the rounds, as the saying is, of the United States papers, mentioning that a young lady when about to be handed out of a sleigh in which she had been driven several miles in a very cold night to a ball, was found, to the horror of her companions, to be a corpse. Every neighbourhood in which balls are frequented, will, it is believed, furnish instances of casualties,—often fatal ones,—as the consequences of these entertainments.

Fourthly—The ball-room exposes to powerful, yea, irresistible temptations to sin. The very genius of the place, if we may so speak, invites to the cherishing of sensual desires. Paul speaks of the “besetting,” or, as the word is, the “well circumstanced,” sin. And where can any combination of circumstances more favourable to temptation be found, than in the youthful assembly of both sexes in the ball-room, during the long hours of night. “Drunkenness” is readily “added to thirst,” when the excitement of the dance and the company, and the abundance and variety of the liquors all tempt to drink. And though any thing grossly indecent may be interdicted, still the whole scene and circumstances of the midnight revel conspire to inflame that corrupt desire, which another Apostle tells us is the embryo of sin and death. (James i. 15.)

Fifthly. The pleasures of the Ball-room are adverse to the whole spirit and life of the Christian.

This has been more than implied in the charge I have already brought against them. But it seems right in forming an estimate of these ensnaring pleasures, to take into account their general inconsistency with the leading principles of the Christian character. How then is the Divine life, for such indeed is the life of the people of God, sustained within them? and how is it exercised? Is it not through the contemplation of the unseen realities which Revelation discloses—and through faith in these—through communion with God—through self-denial—through devotedness to God—love to the Redeemer—communion with his people—the anticipations of his coming, and through watchfulness and preparation for this solemn event? And who may say, that one hour or one night spent in the noisy mirth of a Ball-room, tends in any way to encourage these exercises?

It may be assumed that the Beatitudes, as they are called, define the leading graces of the Christian character. But who that was mourning for sin, or hungering and thirsting after righteousness, or longing to attain purity of heart would find anything congenial to his heaven-born nature in the midnight revel? More reasonable it were to transfer the gorgeous tropical plants from the greenhouse, in which they flourish as though they were under their native sky, to the dark cellar, and to expect them to disclose their beauties there.

Lastly. Dances, as they are generally practised in large promiscuous assemblages of both sexes, with accompaniments of wine and song, and prolonged throughout the night, come under the description of revellings, which are expressly forbidden in the word of God.

The modern ball may not have all the gross features of the ancient revel, but, the difference between them is referable to the improved manners of Society, from the influence of Christianity, which puts open indecency to shame. The main characteristics of both are the same. The Rev. Thomas Scott's description of *revellings*, in his Commentary, is, it is believed, unexceptionable, and it might, without much impropriety, be applied to modern balls. "Revellings," says he, on Gal. v. 21, "were such feasts as were accompanied with music and dancing, and whatever could promote hilarity and sensual gratification." Now of these *revellings, and such like things*, Paul, in the passage referred to, says, "that they which do them shall not inherit the kingdom of God."*

Such then, my hearers, are the moral characteristics and effects of Dancing, as known and practised among us. Admit the supposition that it was just of such dancing that Solomon spoke in the text, "There is a time to dance," and the question comes: Who could find time for such dancing? Not certainly those who are living in their sins, estranged from God, and in rebellion against him. Methinks the warning of the Word would send them to their closets, rather than to the Ball-room—to weeping and mourning rather than to sport and dancing. Hear how it does address them: "Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts ye double-minded. Be afflicted and mourn and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up."—*James iv. 8, 10.* But may not the mourning penitent, the man who is seeking after reconciliation with God, betake himself to the recreations and pleasures of the Ball-room? Yes, if he

* It may be noted that the Greek word, *Komos*, a revel, comes by legitimate etymological descent from the Hebrew, *CHEMOSH*, the name of the abomination of the Moabites, of whose worship revelling and drunkenness formed a principal part.

would undo the good work which has been begun in his soul,—if he would grieve the good spirit of God—if he would exchange the endless joys of Paradise, to which the sorrows of repentance tend, for the short-lived pleasures of sin which are to issue in everlasting woes.

Some may plead that good people, the righteous, are commanded to rejoice, and that they, at least, might countenance the Ball-room with their presence. And so I would say they might, if they could unsay the declaration which they have doubtless often made in the words of the Psalmist, "Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and wine increased." Or, if they could properly find fault with the Apostle James' directions respecting religious joy, "Is any merry? let him sing Psalms." A time for dancing doubtless there will be, so long as the many—the world—seek happiness every where, save from the Fountain of all good. But let not Solomon's declaration be interpreted as though it warranted the kind of dancing which, we have been considering.

In adverting to the proper meaning of the text, I may remark, that the word rendered to dance, signifies to leap or skip for joy, rather than to dance, in what may be called the technical sense.* It stands over against a word which has a correspondent relation to violent grief, so that the whole clause might be rendered "there is a time to wail for sorrow, and a time to bound for joy."

Now while we recognise the fact, that God in His providence multiplied occasions of joy and gladness to all—we must, at the same time, see, that none can warrantably and fully enjoy those

* Any one may satisfy himself of this by turning to the following passages, the only ones I believe in the Hebrew Bible, besides the text, in which the word *RAKAD* occurs, Ps. xxix. 6, cxiv. 4. Joel, ii. 5. Nahum, iii. 2. 1 Chron. xv. 29. Isaiah, xiii. 21.

It is to be remembered too, that the dancing of the ancients, to which allusion is made in the Bible, was either the expression of religious joy, or a kind of exhibition. The dancing of Miriam with the choirs of singers, as they celebrated the deliverance from the Red Sea, is an example of the former, as that of Herodias' daughter is of the latter.

occasions, but those who have been brought into a state of reconciliation and peace with him. They have unbounded reasons for joy, inasmuch as that they are delivered from sin and condemnation, and from the dread of the wrath to come; and because too, that they have been brought to an acquaintance with God, as their God and portion. Such persons may indeed always rejoice, and God himself calls on them to do so. Hear how he addresses them, "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice ye righteous, and shout for joy all ye that are upright in heart." Paul's motto, as we may say, was, "sorrowful yet always rejoicing;" and hear how he exhorts Christians, those, too, who had their own share of trials and persecutions, "Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say rejoice." We might be disposed to say, that Christians must have their time of mourning as well as of rejoicing, and so in one respect they have—they cannot but sorrow under external afflictions, and be in heaviness when exposed "to manifold temptations," as the apostle intimates, (1 Peter i. 6). Yet strange as it may appear, they are called on to rejoice in those adverse circumstances, to count it even all joy that they are so tried. (James i. 2.) And the Saviour himself has plainly declared that a time of trial is the time when they may leap for joy. "Blessed are ye when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven, for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets." A marvellous time this to dance or leap for joy. And, if such be the influence of the grace of the Saviour, that it can turn the occasions of the believer's sorrowing into times of rejoicing, need we wonder that God should in many cases keep his people in humble and afflicted circumstances? With himself for their portion, they may bear to have "their evil things" in this life—it would be too much for them to have at once a full measure of created good, and the reversion of a life of unending and unmingled blessedness and glory, beyond the grave.

In closing these remarks, I would say to the professing followers of the Saviour: Beware of looking with any thing like envy or even complacency on the pleasures of the worldly and ungodly, "For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of

the fool." See that you realise an acquaintance with God, as your own God and Father through Christ. Draw your happiness from his favour, from an approbation of, and delight in his character, and from a conformity to his will. Look at sin, as it is presented to you, in the sacrifice by which your redemption is purchased. And then, so far from envying those who are eagerly running hither and thither in pursuit of earthly pleasures, you will regard them with compassion. You will see that they are set in "slippery places," ready to be "cast down into destruction." And to such persons themselves, I would say: The midnight revel and pleasures of a like kind, are not in themselves more unallowed than they are out of season for *you*. You are exhausting the patience, and provoking the vengeance of God, and are separated from the fiery abyss of wrath, only by that frail partition of flesh that incloses your immortal spirit. Is it for you to sport, and sing, and dance, as though you were secure even against the possibility of future danger. Solomon does say that there is a "time to mourn," and sure I am, this is the time for you to mourn—to mourn over the folly—the guilt—the pollution—and the ruin of sin. Improve this present time thus to mourn. "Turn unto the Lord with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning." And so happily you shall know, in a sense you yet know not, that there is also "a time to dance"—a time to leap for joy. You may then say with the Psalmist, "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sack-cloth and girded me with gladness." For certainly, "they that sow in tears shall reap in joy."—AMEN.